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To cite this article: Songming Yang, Mingsheng Li & Geoff Watson (06 Aug 2026): New Chinese Migrant Businesses and the Making of Ethnoburbs in Auckland: A Cultural and Spatial Analysis, Asian Studies Review, DOI: [10.1080/10357823.2026.2707551](https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2026.2707551)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2026.2707551>



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Published online: 06 Aug 2026.



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New Chinese Migrant Businesses and the Making of Ethnoburbs in Auckland: A Cultural and Spatial Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Ethnoburbs are suburban areas that are characterised by specific ethnic communities, which have significantly reshaped urban landscapes worldwide. This study examines how new Chinese migrant businesses have influenced the cultural and spatial development of ethnoburbs in Auckland, by focusing on the suburb of Albany. Based on in-depth interviews with 16 new Chinese migrant business-owners and guided by mixed embeddedness theory, the article explores how choices about business location relate to social networks, market demand, and institutional settings. We show that Chinese migrant entrepreneurs have actively shaped suburban spaces such as Albany through co-ethnic clustering, cultural branding, residential proximity, and symbolic place-making. These strategies have strengthened both the ethnic identity and economic viability of the area. Theoretically, the article extends mixed embeddedness theory by emphasising spatial agency and symbolic construction. Practically, it highlights the need for inclusive urban planning to support multicultural suburban economies. Overall, the study reframes ethnoburbs as dynamic outcomes of entrepreneurial and cultural strategies in migrant settlement.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 June 2025

Accepted 16 February 2026

KEYWORDS

Chinese migrant entrepreneurship;
ethnoburbs; entrepreneurial strategy; market location; business clustering; cultural embeddedness

Introduction

The concept of the ethnoburb, which was first introduced by Wei Li (1998), refers to suburban residential and commercial areas with a high concentration of a particular ethnic group. Unlike traditional inner-city ethnic enclaves such as Chinatowns, which often formed through historical exclusion and economic marginalisation, ethnoburbs are typically located in suburban areas, and are characterised by affluence, spatial dispersion, and middle-class migrant residents. These areas host a variety of co-ethnic businesses, institutions, and social networks, and serve both cultural and economic functions. As such, ethnoburbs represent a shift in ethnic urban-settlement patterns, reflecting the growing socioeconomic stratification within migrant populations. The present study builds on this conceptual foundation to explore how ethnoburbs are not merely passive demographic concentrations, but are actively produced through entrepreneurial strategies, spatial decisions, and symbolic practices.

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This article shows that these suburban ethnic spaces are not only residential concentrations of ethnic groups but have also evolved into significant centres of cultural identity and economic activity (Xue et al., 2012). In Auckland, New Zealand, such developments are most evident in Albany on the North Shore, where new Chinese migrants have contributed to rapid demographic and spatial transformation (Liu et al., 2022).¹

New Zealand, and particularly Auckland, has experienced a significant demographic shift since the liberalisation of its immigration policies in the late 1980s (Liu et al., 2022). This reform facilitated an influx of skilled and business migrants, many of whom were ethnic Chinese from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia (Spoonley & Meares, 2011). These early migrants largely settled in East Auckland suburbs such as Howick and Meadowlands, establishing family-run businesses that cater to culturally specific needs (Xue et al., 2012). In contrast, the past two decades have seen the arrival of new Chinese migrants from mainland China, who are often referred to as the China-rising generation (Liu et al., 2022).² Members of this group have increasingly clustered in northern suburbs such as Albany and are attracted by the area's prestigious schools, modern residential developments, and natural amenities such as beaches. These migrants typically arrive with financial capital, entrepreneurial aspirations, and strong transnational networks. Their settlement patterns are significantly different from those of earlier migrants, and reflect a distinctive set of economic motivations, educational aspirations, lifestyle preferences, and long-term family strategies.

The shift from East to North Auckland illustrates a more complex layering of sub-ethnic identities within New Zealand's broader Chinese diaspora (Liu et al., 2022). Earlier ethnic Chinese migrants tended to form mixed cultural and commercial centres in East Auckland (Chan & Koh, 2017; Spoonley & Meares, 2011; Xue et al., 2012), while new China-born migrants are concentrated in the northern suburbs. This has reshaped the cultural composition and the commercial landscape of the Chinese diaspora in Auckland (Xue et al., 2012).

Albany has gradually become a significant Chinese ethnoburb and is characterised by the concentration of Chinese residents and a growing ecosystem of co-ethnic businesses. These developments highlight the need to understand how migrant entrepreneurship is embedded in the ethnoburb while simultaneously shaping its social and spatial character. In particular, the establishment of small businesses by new Chinese migrants has played a critical role in strengthening the cultural character and territorial consolidation of such ethnoburbs.

To frame this inquiry, the study draws on mixed embeddedness theory (Kloosterman, 2010; Kloosterman & Rath, 2001), which conceptualises migrant entrepreneurship as shaped by the interaction between individual resources, social networks, and broader institutional and market environments. This framework is particularly useful for examining how migrant entrepreneurs both respond to and shape the structural contexts in which they operate. By applying this perspective to the case of Chinese migrant businesses in Albany, the article highlights the spatial and symbolic agency of migrants in suburban contexts. This theoretical perspective complements the concept of ethnoburbs by revealing how suburban ethnic economies are not merely formed by demographic clustering, but also strategically constructed through business location decisions, cultural branding, and place-making practices.

While most existing studies understand ethnoburbs as outcomes of migration-driven demographic clustering, this study asks how new Chinese migrant entrepreneurs in Albany, Auckland, not only respond to but actively reshape suburban landscapes through their business strategies and cultural practices. This conceptual puzzle guides the article's inquiry into the spatial agency of migrant entrepreneurs and their symbolic construction of place.

The article introduces a theoretical intervention by extending the mixed embeddedness framework (Kloosterman, 2010) to incorporate spatial and symbolic dimensions of migrant entrepreneurship. Rather than viewing entrepreneurs as reactive to structural contexts, this study emphasises their proactive role in shaping ethnoburbs. Through this intervention, the study contributes to evolving debates on how migrant economies influence suburban transformation in multicultural urban contexts.

Building on Liu et al.'s (2022) identification of Albany as an emerging Chinese ethnoburb, this study investigates how the business development strategies of new Chinese migrants contribute to the formation, consolidation, and transformation of Chinese suburban spaces in Auckland. This qualitative study focuses specifically on how migrant entrepreneurship intersects with settlement patterns, local infrastructure, and community identity to shape urban ethnic geographies. Through this approach, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interrelationships between migration, business, and suburban transformation in multicultural cities. It addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do new Chinese migrant entrepreneurs in Auckland actively shape suburban space and identity through their business practices?
- RQ2: In what ways do business location strategies, cultural branding, and spatial clustering contribute to the symbolic and functional construction of ethnoburbs?
- RQ3: How does the integration of spatial agency into the mixed embeddedness framework advance our understanding of migrant entrepreneurship and suburban transformation?

Literature Review

From enclaves to ethnoburbs

The concept of the ethnic enclave has long shaped scholarly understandings of migrant settlement and economic adaptation. Traditionally, ethnic enclaves refer to inner-city neighbourhoods where co-ethnic populations concentrate to access cultural familiarity, linguistic resources, and economic survival mechanisms (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Waldinger, 1996). Classic examples such as Chinatowns demonstrate how these enclaves provide mutual support but are also often characterised by lower-income status, spatial marginality, and limited upward mobility.

However, this model has been increasingly critiqued for its overemphasis on isolation and passive patterns of settlement (Zhou, 2005). In response, Li (1998, 2009) introduced the concept of ethnoburbs, which are suburban ethnic clusters characterised by middle-class status, residential choice, and proactive business development. This shift reflects a broader transformation in migrant spatial strategies,

moving from necessity-driven concentration towards opportunity-driven spatial agency. This study builds on this transition by showing how Chinese migrant entrepreneurs in Albany not only benefit from co-ethnic proximity but also actively shape suburban spaces through their symbolic place-making, business branding, and locational strategies.

Ethnoburbs and Chinese migrant business clustering

The spatial distribution of the new Chinese businesses is highly related to where new Chinese migrants are concentrated geographically: namely, the Chinese ethnoburbs (Liu et al., 2022; Xue et al., 2012). Ethnoburbs are characterised by a dense network of ethnic businesses, cultural institutions, and social networks that cater to the needs and preferences of the residents in the community (Li, 2005). These areas differ from traditional inner-city ethnic enclaves such as Chinatowns (Li, 1998), which typically contain concentrations of low-income migrants in dense urban settings. Ethnoburbs, by contrast, are suburban and host middle-class, highly educated, and economically active migrant populations (Frazier & Margai, 2010; Liu et al., 2022). As Xue et al. (2012) note, ethnoburbs provide a sense of familiarity, comfort, and community for migrants, while also contributing to the local economy through the development of ethnic businesses.

Globally, studies have documented Chinese ethnoburbs in cities such as Los Angeles, Toronto, and Sydney, where economic and cultural infrastructure fosters ethnic cohesion and visibility (Li, 2005; Perry et al., 2020; Robertson et al., 2022). In New Zealand, however, this phenomenon has received limited scholarly attention (Liu et al., 2022; Spoonley & Meares, 2011; Xue et al., 2012). In Auckland, Chinese settlement has become increasingly concentrated in suburbs such as the North Shore and East Auckland, where Chinese-owned businesses have also clustered (Liu et al., 2022; Spoonley & Meares, 2011; Xue et al., 2012). This concentration reflects the close relationship between residential settlement and business development among new Chinese migrants. Against this broader Auckland context, Liu et al. (2022) identified Albany as a prominent Chinese ethnoburb through spatial and ethnographic analysis, characterised by demographic concentration, business presence, and urban development. Using a 15 per cent threshold of China-born residents, they visualised clusters of Chinese settlement and commercial activity across the region, highlighting Albany's distinctiveness. Based on Li's (2009) definition of an ethnoburb as 'not only a mosaic of residential areas but also a complex of business districts', Albany can be understood as a new Chinese ethnoburb because it contains multiple interconnected residential and business clusters. Liu et al. (2022) further demonstrate that demographic change has reshaped the ethnic composition of local businesses in Albany, providing empirical evidence for its development as a Chinese ethnoburb.

Albany comprises six residential clusters and seven business clusters. In the New Zealand census, these residential clusters are defined as suburbs that together form the broader Albany area. The residential and commercial clusters are dispersed across Albany but closely interconnected, together forming an integrated ethnoburb (Liu et al., 2022).

Migrant business development and migrant entrepreneurship

Ethnoburbs depend on ethnic entrepreneurship (Liu et al., 2023). Researchers on migrant entrepreneurship have shown that migrant businesses frequently play a dual role: they provide migrants with economic mobility while strengthening ethnic networks and identities (Kloosterman, 2010). For instance, Chinese migrant businesses usually cluster around food industries, retail stores, and professional services (Gan & Conroy, 2024; Spoonley & Meares, 2011), which typically serve both co-ethnic and mainstream customers as cultural intermediaries (Cain & Spoonley, 2013; Johnston et al., 2011; Meares et al., 2011). These industries also generate employment and support larger urban economies (Robertson et al., 2022).

However, migrant businesses also have unique challenges: regulatory obstacles, a lack of access to mainstream markets, and differences in business culture limit the growth of these businesses (Cain & Spoonley, 2013; Collins, 2003; Johnston et al., 2011; Robertson et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2019). Some Chinese business-owners in New Zealand have struggled to understand local policies and consumer preferences (Meares et al., 2011), but Chinese entrepreneurs have adapted through bilingual services, co-ethnic networks, and networking in ethnic business associations (Cain & Spoonley, 2013; Meares et al., 2011). These findings resonate with global research on ethnic business resilience.

Albany's business clusters, such as Corinthian Drive and Rosedale Road, are characterised by a strong concentration of Chinese-owned businesses, with more than 40 per cent of retail businesses in some areas owned by Chinese migrants (Liu et al., 2022). Businesses serve dual purposes, providing economic livelihoods while supporting cultural reproduction. According to Liu et al. (2022), many entrepreneurs choose to operate in Chinese ethnoburbs such as Albany to remain close to their customer base, thereby reinforcing spatial ties. This spatial logic creates a feedback loop in which people live, work, and consume within the same ethnically concentrated areas, further strengthening the identity of the ethnoburb.

Spatial transformation and the built environment

Research has indicated that international business reconfigures the built environment through architecture, signage, and land-use. McArthur (2017) found that in Auckland Chinese businesses are a powerful driving force for the commercialisation of suburban economic activities. As Collins et al. (2020) argue in the Australian context, immigrant entrepreneurs are not merely economic actors but also agents of urban place-making, who reshape the built environment through their business presence, signage, architectural expression, and community-oriented activities. These insights are particularly relevant to understanding how Chinese entrepreneurs in Albany help define the spatial and symbolic contours of the ethnoburb. Areas such as Albany have shopping centres and business districts that are influenced by transnational expressions that cater to both Chinese and non-Chinese customers. However, Zhou and Cho (2010) argue that most conflicts arise when suburban residents view ethnic businesses as disrupting the character of the community. In addition, as demand for commercial space in ethnoburbs continues to grow, real estate prices increase, which makes accessibility more difficult for migrant businesses. This spatial change requires a new paradigm for traditional urban planning and an inclusive policy approach to accommodate a multicultural commercial landscape.

Social integration and multiculturalism

The relationship between ethnoburbs and social integration is complex. Ethnoburbs help to create cultural continuity among migrants, but they can also give the impression of social isolation (Zhou, 2021). It is an open question whether ethnoburbs lead to integration or require ethnic segregation (Ishizawa & Arunachalam, 2014; Rahman et al., 2021; Sinkovics & Reuber, 2021; Wang & Warn, 2019; Zhou, 2021). Some studies suggest that ethnoburbs encourage selective cultural adaptation, where migrants preserve their cultural traditions and strategically interact with others in society (Ishizawa & Arunachalam, 2014), while others focus on the lack of cross-cultural interaction in ethnoburbs, which leads to social divisions (Wang & Warn, 2019). Chinese-owned businesses are well integrated into the urban economic structure, but their social interaction with non-Chinese people remains limited (Cain & Spoonley, 2013; Meares et al., 2011). Some recommended initiatives for creating multicultural interfaces include cultural festivals and bilingual business initiatives (Cain & Spoonley, 2013; Meares et al., 2011; Spoonley & Meares, 2011). This concept of diversity has informed urban planning policies in Auckland aimed at developing more inclusive urban areas. This highlights the economic benefits and social challenges of ethnoburbs (Liu et al., 2023).

Theoretical Framework

Mixed embeddedness theory

This research is guided by mixed embeddedness theory (Kloosterman, 2010), which is an effective analytical approach widely used in migrant entrepreneurship research. Kloosterman and Rath (2001) developed and used this approach to guide their research on the economic activities of immigrant businesses in the Netherlands. The approach has been further refined so that it can distinguish between macro-, meso-, and micro-level contexts of migrant entrepreneurship (Kloosterman, 2010; Kloosterman & Rath, 2010), thereby enabling explanation of the embeddedness of entrepreneurs in different social and institutional contexts (Bagwell, 2018; Jones et al., 2014; Solano, 2019; Wahlbeck, 2018). In the social context, mixed embeddedness theory suggests that migrant entrepreneurs are embedded in both the home and host countries and that their businesses are influenced by the interplay of economic, social, and cultural factors from both social contexts (Solano, 2016). In the institutional context, the approach emphasises the importance of examining the diversity of embeddedness and how entrepreneurs navigate and negotiate the different institutional environments and social relationships to establish and maintain their businesses (Vertovec, 2007).

More systematically, the approach identifies the interaction and interplay of wider institutional regulatory constraints (i.e., macro factors), market factors (i.e., meso factors), and individual resources (such as human capital resources, financial resources, and socio-cultural resources) of entrepreneurs (i.e., micro factors) as crucial in influencing entrepreneurial behaviour (Kloosterman & Rath, 2010). The interaction of all factors at the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels shapes the opportunity structures for migrant entrepreneurs. It thus explains a range of entrepreneurial business outcomes and their underpinnings. This is an advance on previous interpretations, which emphasised cultural factors as paramount (Kloosterman et al., 1999). Using the mixed embeddedness

approach, factors such as the prior experience of the new Chinese migrant business-owners in their homeland and in New Zealand, which is a neoliberal business and social environment (Spoonley & Meares, 2011), can be considered when trying to understand how these business-owners decide to start new businesses, which suppliers and customers they target, where they locate their businesses and offices, and what strategies they use to promote their businesses.

The approach is thus an efficient way to analyse transnational migrant entrepreneurship in different contexts. It can clarify the activities and actions of transnational migrant entrepreneurs, while also explaining what environmental factors might influence the initiation and development of this form of entrepreneurship (Solano, 2019; Yamamura & Lassalle, 2021).

The mixed embeddedness framework has been applied in numerous national and ethnic contexts. Bagwell (2018) used it to analyse Vietnamese businesses in London, showing how entrepreneurs navigate between community support networks and institutional constraints. Solano (2019) examined Moroccan migrant entrepreneurs in Amsterdam and Milan, highlighting the role of transnational practices and dual embeddedness. Similarly, Jones et al. (2014) applied the framework to new migrant enterprises in the UK, underscoring how different institutional environments shape entrepreneurial opportunities. These studies demonstrate that mixed embeddedness is a robust and adaptable framework suitable for analysing migrant entrepreneurship across diverse settings, including Chinese businesses in Auckland.

Gaps and contributions

Despite extensive research on ethnoburbs, several gaps remain. The first is that Auckland's Chinese ethnoburbs have received comparatively limited scholarly attention. While international studies have examined Chinese ethnoburbs in cities such as Los Angeles, Toronto, and Sydney (Li, 2005; Perry et al., 2020; Robertson et al., 2022), research specifically focusing on Auckland remains limited. Although a few studies have examined certain aspects (Johnston et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2022; Spoonley & Meares, 2011; Xue et al., 2012), the specific business development patterns and spatial dynamics of Chinese ethnoburbs in Auckland remain underexplored. Entrepreneurial strategies represent another underexplored area in existing research. Much of the existing literature on migrant entrepreneurship has concentrated on early migrants adapting to host-country economies. However, there is limited insight into how more recent waves of Chinese migrants who have arrived in Auckland over the past two decades establish and organise their businesses. Accordingly, this article examines how the entrepreneurial practices of new Chinese migrants both influence and are influenced by the evolving character of Chinese ethnoburbs in Auckland.

The spatial and policy dimensions should also attract more academic attention. While there is evidence that ethnoburbs are considered economically important (Li, 2009), it is less clear how policies related to urban planning and zoning regulations impact the spatial expansion and development of ethnoburbs. For example, in the case of New Zealand, where the focus of most planning policies revolves around suburban residential functions (Richardson, 2022), the integration of commercial uses within ethnoburbs is contentious. Exploring how policy frameworks shape the development of ethnoburbs

and how Chinese entrepreneurs navigate these policies will be useful for urban planners and policymakers. Lastly, intercultural business interaction is an aspect of ethnoburb economies that has yet to be investigated. While ethnic commercial centres play an important role in multicultural cities, there is a need to examine how they facilitate or constrain cross-cultural interactions between migrant entrepreneurs and other local communities. Some Chinese businesses serve only co-ethnic customers (Meares et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2021), raising questions about whether they contribute to broader intercultural integration. Examining strategies that facilitate intercultural engagement in Auckland's ethnoburbs could provide valuable insights for fostering more inclusive business environments.

Addressing these gaps, this study draws on the lived experiences of Chinese migrant entrepreneurs to examine how ethnic businesses influence local identity, spatial development, and interactions with co-ethnic and non-ethnic residents.

In addition to addressing empirical gaps, the study also advances theoretical understanding by extending the mixed embeddedness framework. By incorporating spatial agency and symbolic construction into entrepreneurial decision-making, it reconceptualises migrant entrepreneurs as not merely responsive to structural and institutional conditions, but also as spatial actors who reshape suburban environments. Their locational strategies, cultural branding, and place-naming practices constitute forms of symbolic and spatial agency. This theoretical intervention offers a more dynamic, spatialised, and culturally embedded perspective on how ethnoburbs are produced and maintained, thereby moving beyond predominantly structuralist interpretations in the existing literature.

Method

A qualitative research approach was adopted for this study. It used in-depth interviews and thematic analysis with 16 new Chinese migrant business-owners in the Albany area of Auckland to better understand their motivations, challenges, and contributions to the ethnoburb.

Sampling

To ensure data diversity, purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques were used. This strategy helped the researcher locate eligible respondents and recruit additional participants through referrals from existing respondents. Participants were required to be Chinese migrant business-owners who had migrated to New Zealand from mainland China after the enactment of the Immigration Act 1987 and whose businesses were officially registered with the New Zealand Companies Office. In this study, the term new Chinese migrants follows established usage in New Zealand migration studies, which typically distinguishes post-1987 arrivals from earlier waves of Chinese migration (Liu, 2017). However, considering that 'new' is a relative term and some participants had lived in New Zealand for more than 20 years, and to avoid conceptual ambiguity, we treat the term as a policy-era classification rather than a statement of recency.

Interviews were conducted with 16 eligible new Chinese migrant business-owners, who were originally from mainland China. Their businesses cover various industries in Auckland – namely, low-skilled (e.g., retail, wholesale, restaurants, and hairdressing) and high-skilled (e.g., financial, consulting, technology, and education). Among the participants, there were 10 male entrepreneurs and six female entrepreneurs. Seven were recent migrants (0–10 years), six were mid-term migrants (11–20 years), and three were long-term migrants (21+ years). Their companies were all located in the Albany area. All interviews were digitally recorded with the written consent of the interviewee, and the researcher also took notes during the interviews. Respondents were allocated pseudonyms during the coding process to ensure confidentiality. All interviewees chose to be interviewed in Mandarin because they were familiar with the language, which ensured they could express their ideas and experiences more naturally.

Data collection and analysis

Most of the interviews were conducted between 2023 and 2024, and the research questions covered the following topics: immigrant experiences and entrepreneurial motivations; company information; considerations for company location; the relationship between the company location and Chinese ethnoburbs, such as whether the company address is close to the Chinese ethnoburbs, etc. To ensure the integrity and reliability of the data, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English.

A thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns and core themes across the dataset, following the six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of transcripts; (2) initial coding of meaningful units using NVivo software; (3) searching for candidate themes by grouping related codes; (4) reviewing and refining themes in relation to the entire dataset; (5) defining and naming themes to capture their conceptual essence; and (6) producing the final narrative with illustrative quotes.

Coding was inductive and data-driven, allowing themes to emerge from participants' lived experiences rather than being predetermined by existing theory. However, the analysis was also sensitised by the study's theoretical framework, particularly the concepts of spatial embeddedness, community identity, and business strategy. To enhance the credibility of the analysis, selected transcripts and theme structures were cross-checked through peer debriefing with a researcher familiar with qualitative coding. This process helped ensure consistency in interpretation and strengthened the analytical robustness of the study.

Findings

This section presents an in-depth analysis of the data collected from interviews with Chinese migrant entrepreneurs in Albany. It then uses thematic analysis to elaborate how business, urban spatial practices, and cultural production interact in subtle and complex ways when associated with ethnoburbs.

Considerations in choosing business locations

Entrepreneurial decisions around business location are shaped by a combination of cultural values, market logic, and practical life needs. Based on the interview data, three main drivers emerged: cultural embeddedness, ethnic market targeting, and residential convenience. These dimensions often intersect but can be analytically distinguished to better understand the locational rationales of Chinese migrant entrepreneurs in Albany.

Cultural embeddedness and community identity

Many entrepreneurs selected their business locations to maintain cultural continuity and strengthen co-ethnic identity. This cultural embeddedness was expressed in both symbolic and practical ways, such as through language, signage, aesthetics, and the broader social atmosphere of the area. In doing so, they showed a clear preference for establishing their businesses within areas where a visible and accessible Chinese community already existed. These regions are now referred to as Chinese ethnoburbs, which offer linguistic and cultural familiarity and provide a ready-made customer base characterised by shared consumption preferences and social values. Vivian, who runs a children's art school, emphasised that her business targets Chinese families specifically and that her location decisions were based on proximity to reputable schools and high-density Chinese communities:

I focused on areas with a strong flow of Chinese families, since my clients are mainly Chinese children. Albany stood out because it has many good schools, including the private schools Pinehurst and Kristin. Because Chinese parents here value education and are more willing to invest in extracurricular programmes. Among my three campuses, Albany has the largest and highest-quality student base.

Her decision was related to ethnic density and the education concepts of Chinese families, whose investment in education made them a reliable customer base for extra-curricular services. This description illustrates the core dynamics of ethnoburb formation: the intersection of ethnic identity, community familiarity, and entrepreneurial strategies. Chinese migrant entrepreneurs often prioritise areas where they can serve culturally similar consumers and provide goods and services that reflect common lifestyles. These factors reduce the barriers to operating in unfamiliar markets and increase market efficiency through targeted niche participation.

Cultural factors also influenced the type of business selected. Yong and Jackson both operate Lanzhou beef noodle restaurants in Albany because of that product's popularity and cultural resonance in Chinese society. As Jackson noted, Lanzhou beef noodles are highly popular among both Chinese and local (non-Chinese) consumers and so have cross-cultural appeal. His decision reflects a conscious strategy to combine cultural representation with marketing:

I chose to open a Lanzhou beef noodle restaurant because this type of cuisine is extremely popular in China. I also believe that noodles are a food category that both Chinese and local customers can appreciate. I often visit Australia, where the Lanzhou noodle businesses in the Chinese community are already highly developed and well-established. Moreover, there are many Chinese migrants from the northern part of China in Albany who enjoy eating noodles.

These examples show that businesses are not only commercial enterprises, but also cultural agents, sustaining culinary traditions and creating a sense of community. Cultural and community factors are central to the business location strategies among Chinese migrant entrepreneurs in Auckland. Their choices reflect a combination of cultural embeddedness and strategic market targeting, while contributing to the ongoing formation and consolidation of ethnoburbs. This finding reflects a significant feature of ethnic urban areas: they are not just geographic distribution centres, but cultural and economic centres for specific communities. The spatial concentration of co-ethnic consumers enhances the efficiency of marketing, service delivery, and customer engagement. It also reduces the emotional and psychological stress of operating in culturally unfamiliar environments. Such decisions reflect spatial agency, wherein cultural identity becomes a strategic tool for shaping suburban ethnic geographies, thereby reinforcing the symbolic construction of the ethnoburb.

Ethnic market targeting and demographic strategy

Beyond cultural affiliation, many migrant entrepreneurs made strategic decisions based on demographic factors such as population density, income levels, and the changing composition of Chinese subgroups in Auckland. These decisions reflect a more market-oriented rationale that overlaps but is distinct from cultural identity concerns. Chinese migrant businesses benefit from the pre-existing community in the ethnoburb, which provides a ready customer base. Most respondents indicated that their strategic focus was not on accessing broad or mainstream markets, but rather on ethnic markets whose consumer behaviour, cultural expectations, and product preferences aligned with their own backgrounds. This targeted approach led many entrepreneurs to intentionally locate businesses in suburbs with high densities of Chinese migrants to ensure built-in demand and cultural familiarity. Kaiwen, who runs a supermarket, stated that he chose Albany because of its concentration of Chinese migrants: ‘When choosing a business location, my main consideration was areas with a high concentration of Chinese residents, because my target customers are Chinese’. This emphasises a common spatial logic in the formation of ethnoburbs, where residential clustering generates commercial demand, which in turn encourages further business investment and social density. Entrepreneurs are attuned to this feedback loop and often make detailed demographic observations before choosing a site. Hank, who operates a hair salon, said that he and his team had conducted extensive market research before choosing Albany:

Before choosing a location, we conducted detailed research on the local population composition, such as how many Asians and Chinese live in the area, their age ranges, and whether they are new migrants. Among all the areas we looked into, Albany stood out as a rapidly growing hub for the Chinese community, it is a kind of vortex centre for Chinese population growth.

Hank’s careful analysis of the population’s ethnicity, family composition, and migration background informed the location of the business, as well as its marketing strategy and service design. Jackson also emphasised how ethnic demographics and evolving consumption habits shaped both his location decision and business model:

I chose Albany because it has a high concentration of Chinese residents, especially younger new migrants with strong spending power. Compared to the East which has more long-established Cantonese migrants from places like Hong Kong and Malaysia, Albany has seen

a surge of mainland Chinese migrants since 2010. This demographic change directly affects the local dining environment, hence the popularity of hotpot, barbecue, spicy street food, and noodle restaurants in the area.

He further noted the cuisine preferences that were shaping restaurant trends, such as a demand for regional Chinese cuisines, which corresponded with the backgrounds of the new migrant population from mainland China. His reason for conducting business in Albany reflected an understanding of market segmentation within the broader ethnic community and the spatial patterning of middle-class migration.

These insights show that Chinese entrepreneurs adopted strategic spatial targeting, aligning location with ethnic demographics to minimise risk and tailor services. They benefit from co-ethnic markets while strengthening the cultural and economic density of ethnoburbs. These decisions contribute to symbolic ethnic business landmarks and foster more resilient migrant business ecosystems. The focus on co-ethnic consumer bases not only leverages existing settlement patterns but also contributes to the spatial and symbolic consolidation of the Chinese ethnoburb in Albany.

Residential proximity and daily operational convenience

A third recurring theme involved practical considerations, particularly the desire to live near the workplace to save time, balance family life, and manage daily operations more easily. This spatial overlap between home and business was not merely a matter of convenience; it reflected a strategic decision shaped by commuting efficiency, daily logistical needs, family responsibilities, and a desire for deeper community embeddedness. Many Chinese entrepreneurs preferred to establish their businesses within ethnoburbs where they already lived, thereby integrating residential and commercial lives. More than half of the interviewees indicated that residential proximity to their workplace significantly influenced their locational decisions.

Maike, who runs a loan and mortgage business, explained: 'My company chose Albany because I live here and it's close to home, making it convenient for me to commute to work'. Wang, a construction business-owner, added a security and lifestyle perspective: 'I chose Albany because it's close to home and can be reached in 10 minutes without worrying about traffic congestion. Albany has relatively good public security and an excellent environment'.

This spatial convergence contributes to the cohesion and sustainability of ethnoburbs such as Albany. When entrepreneurs live and work within the same suburban precinct, they help consolidate the multifunctional character of the space, which is both a residential area and a commercial centre. It also shows how Chinese entrepreneurs strategically consolidate life and work in shared spaces to enhance efficiency, reduce cost and stress, and deepen their cultural and economic integration. These decisions reinforce the idea that Chinese migrant entrepreneurs are not just economic actors but also local residents and community members. Their spatial strategies demonstrate how business development, cultural affiliation, and daily life are co-produced in the shaping of Auckland's urban periphery. The spatial overlap of residential and commercial lives exemplifies how everyday practices co-produce suburban ethnic space, thereby reinforcing both cultural embeddedness and territorial cohesion.

The mutual influence between businesses and ethnoburbs

The interviews demonstrate the mutually beneficial relationship between Chinese migrant businesses and ethnoburbs. The presence of Chinese businesses in ethnoburbs reinforces the area's cultural identity, attracting more Chinese residents and customers. At the same time, ethnoburbs provide Chinese businesses with a concentrated customer base, promoting faster growth and easier market entry. These businesses situate themselves in existing ethnoburbs and actively shape the social, cultural, and spatial character of the area. Their presence has contributed to the formation of ethnically defined business districts, transforming suburbs such as Albany into recognisable Chinese business centres. Yong, who runs a noodle restaurant, explained how he and several other Chinese business-owners collaboratively coined the name '唐人汇' (*Tangrenhui*) to represent the emerging cluster on Corinthian Drive in Albany.³ This name did not officially exist but was created to enhance the ethnic visibility and recognisability of the location within the local Chinese community:

The official name of this place is Corinthian Drive. Back in 2014, I got together with several merchants and decided to give it a Chinese name, '*Tangrenhui*', which means a place where Chinese people gather, so that Chinese people would know that there is such a place in Albany for us. If you say Corinthian Drive, most people in the Chinese community will not recognise it or remember it. But if you say *Tangrenhui*, everyone knows it's the place to go for Chinese food. Now it's become a well-known name among both Chinese community and local residents, just like there's a Chinatown in East Auckland.

This informal name has now been widely adopted in the local Chinese community, demonstrating how entrepreneurs use cultural symbols to build brands that effectively transform an ordinary commercial location into an ethnic landmark. This cultural naming behaviour is a symbolic declaration of place identity that increases the attractiveness of the area to Chinese customers and business operators. This indicates that migrant business-owners are not merely passive beneficiaries of spatial conditions but active participants in constructing symbolic cultural geography. Through the process of naming, ethnic entrepreneurs facilitate both customer engagement and further ethnic clustering, reinforcing Albany's identity as a Chinese ethnoburb.

This symbolic transformation is accompanied by strategic locational decisions. Miao, a logistics operator, selected an office near *Tangrenhui* for long-term development and anticipated growth: 'My company is very close to *Tangrenhui*, and the future development prospects of this location will be very good'. Moreover, entrepreneurs frequently observed how the presence of Chinese businesses began to reshape Albany's demographic and social landscape. Hank, who operates a salon, reported undertaking detailed market surveys before deciding on Albany as a business location:

My client views Albany as a Chinese food centre where they can taste a variety of Chinese dishes. And they can have one-stop shopping to meet a range of their needs, such as getting a haircut, having a meal, and buying bubble tea.

These micro-level choices collectively promote and consolidate the formation of ethnoburbs, making them ideal places for both living and consuming. These practical location decisions by entrepreneurs gradually contribute to the spatial integration of ethnoburbs,

making them more attractive to future residents and customers. Their businesses provide services that contribute to the ethnic landscape of Albany as cultural and visual markers of the Chinese presence.

The data demonstrates that the formation of Chinese ethnoburbs such as Albany is not a linear process of demographic settlement followed by commercial development. Rather, it is a dynamic, mutually constitutive process in which businesses both respond to and actively construct the ethnocultural characteristics of ethnoburbs. These enterprises have embedded culture into space through naming practices, targeted investment, and customer engagement. In these ways, they co-produce ethnoburbs as both commercial and social landscapes. Albany's development as an ethnoburb exemplifies how entrepreneurial foresight and cultural strategy shape urban ethnic geographies, and migrant businesses are a key factor in the socio-spatial evolution of contemporary suburbs.

The role of ethnoburbs in supporting business viability

Chinese ethnoburbs such as Albany provide convenient conditions for the growth of migrant businesses, including market accessibility and supportive infrastructure. These areas provide low-barrier entry points for new migrant entrepreneurs, especially those facing linguistic challenges, unfamiliar regulatory systems, or limited seed capital. For instance, Baoluo, who runs a yoga studio, pointed out that the socio-economic status of Albany residents benefitted his business: 'Albany's customers here are high quality and have strong purchasing power, because most of our customers are wealthy housewives'. Businesses serving niche or high-end markets find Albany attractive due to the affluence of its residents, especially among Chinese migrants seeking culturally aligned services.

Furthermore, ethnoburbs such as Albany provide physical infrastructure that is beneficial to business operations. Several participants praised the availability of modern commercial spaces and ease of parking. Maike observed: 'Parking in Albany is very convenient because my clients often come to the company, so parking is very important. And the rent here is much cheaper than in the city centre'. These considerations indicate that the built environment itself is an economic enabler: parking availability, affordable rents, and proximity to co-ethnic communities all create favourable conditions for businesses. These findings position ethnoburbs as critical sites for migrant economic participation, which provide consumer markets and ecosystems that support the development of migrant businesses.

The development of business clusters and the formation of ethnoburbs

While the formation of ethnoburbs is often attributed to patterns of residential clustering, the empirical evidence from this study suggests that business activity plays a significant role in generating and sustaining these ethnoburbs. In Albany, the development of Chinese migrant businesses has responded to an existing demographic base, and actively shaped the character, growth, and symbolic identity of the area. Many interviewees stated that the presence of successful businesses was a key reason for choosing Albany, thereby creating a business cluster effect. Xuerui, who operates an art studio that targets Chinese children, pointed out:

The main reason for opening an art school in Albany is because there are already a lot of art schools here, and everyone knows that there are a lot of workshops here, so it's easy for my school to enrol new students.

Xuerui's decision reflects a broader trend: the success of early education and service-oriented businesses encourages other entrepreneurs to cluster in the same area, thereby reinforcing the educational and cultural infrastructure valued by Chinese families. This mutually reinforcing cycle has accelerated the development of ethnoburbs, where businesses attract residents and residents demand more services that meet their cultural needs. Moreover, this suggests that business clusters can promote the growth of local markets and generate reputational capital. The concentration of similar business types in Albany has created a branding effect, making the area a recognised destination for specific services within the Chinese community.

Participants contrasted Albany with other areas of Auckland, describing how commercial vitality in Albany has stimulated broader residential migration. Jackson observed:

From the perspective of Chinese migrant composition, several areas in Auckland are known for their high concentration of Chinese residents. In the eastern suburbs, such as Flat Bush and Howick, many residents are earlier migrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan. This is reflected in the local food scene, where Cantonese-style teahouses are especially prevalent. By contrast, since around 2014, a growing number of new migrants from mainland China have chosen to settle in Albany on the North Shore. One key reason is the strong educational resources in Albany, including two well-regarded private schools, Pinehurst and Kristin. Another is its high quality of life, with many bay-area suburbs, like Browns Bay, which offers scenic coastal living ideal for families. These new migrants include both northern and southern Chinese, which has led to a diverse culinary landscape. Restaurants in Albany cater to a variety of regional Chinese cuisines.

Jackson acknowledges that the concentration of culturally distinctive businesses has helped establish Albany's identity as a food centre for new Chinese migrants. This food density meets the existing demand and helps to form spatial preferences of future migrants, strengthening the ethnoburb status of the area.

Moreover, some participants noted that real-estate developers and agents have capitalised on this clustering effect, using the presence of Chinese businesses and education resources as key points in housing advertisements. This shows that the ethnic commercial landscape has influenced location decisions. Yong stated:

When I was choosing a location for my business, the agent introduced me to the broader environment of Albany. For example, it is close to Massey University and the Westfield Albany mall, and many Chinese residents live in the surrounding neighbourhoods. In addition, there is a significant amount of commercial land being planned and developed in the area. I saw strong potential for business growth here, so I decided to set up my company in Albany.

These interviews demonstrate that migrant business clusters construct place identity, facilitate demographic change, and promote a positive cycle of development in commercial and residential areas. Ethnoburbs are evolving urban spaces shaped by migrant agency, entrepreneurial innovation, and reciprocal socio-spatial dynamics. The analysis demonstrates that Chinese ethnoburbs in Albany are deeply shaped by the entrepreneurial strategies and cultural concepts of Chinese migrants. A business is not just an

economic unit: it is a cultural agent that helps determine where people live, how people interact, and the broader social and spatial contexts in which they are embedded. Chinese entrepreneurs balance cultural similarities and market conditions when choosing business locations. Their decisions are informed by an understanding of where co-ethnic populations live, what kinds of goods and services they need, and how they can leverage community networks to promote the growth of their businesses. At the same time, these businesses promote cultural identity and spatial patterns in ethnoburbs.

The relationships between business and space explored in this study have broad implications for urban planning, integration policy, and multicultural dynamism. This research highlights the role that migrant entrepreneurs play in shaping urban landscapes, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the intersections between the social and economic in contemporary cities. The cultural and spatial character of Chinese ethnoburbs in Auckland is actively produced and sustained through these business practices. The development of Chinese migrant businesses is an important contributing factor in the formation of ethnoburbs and an integral part of Auckland's urban transformation.

Discussion

This section clarifies the contributions of the study across three dimensions: theoretical advancement, empirical insights, and practical relevance.

Consistency with previous research

This study enhances and extends existing understandings of Chinese ethnoburbs and migrant entrepreneurship. Consistent with previous research (Li, 2009; Liu et al., 2022), the findings demonstrate that Chinese migrant entrepreneurs strategically choose to cluster in suburban areas such as Albany, where cultural familiarity, linguistic accessibility, and a high concentration of co-ethnic consumers provide suitable sites for business development. These observations reflect global experiences in cities such as Los Angeles, Toronto, and Sydney, where Chinese migrants have established ethnoburbs characterised by middle-class residential clusters and co-ethnic commercial districts (Perry et al., 2020; Robertson et al., 2022).

As shown in the section on ethnic market targeting, choices about business location reflect proactive entrepreneurial strategies informed by both cultural identity and spatial opportunity. Furthermore, the findings confirmed the crucial principles of mixed embeddedness theory (Kloosterman, 2010), insofar as migrant businesses are embedded in ethnic social networks and the broader institutional and market environments of the host country. Chinese entrepreneurs in Albany rely on co-ethnic social networks while actively using local market opportunities such as educational resources and high-end consumer markets as well as responding to local institutional environments such as planning policies and the business environment. Their strategic locational decisions were shaped by the interdependence between residential proximity, ethnic market density, and infrastructural accessibility. These factors support Kloosterman's (2010) argument that migrant businesses have a positive role in spatial construction and cultural reproduction within local communities.

Differences and new insights

This study also offers new insights that improve current theoretical understanding. First, unlike studies of traditional ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown (Li, 2005), which emphasise the clustering of enterprises for survival, this article has shown that the clustering of Chinese businesses in Albany is more of an active and strategic choice. These enterprises are motivated not only by the need to survive, but also by their perceptions of market segments and the demands of high-end customers. This feature contrasts with previous studies in traditional ethnoburbs such as Sydney, Toronto, and Los Angeles (Li, 1998; Perry et al., 2020; Robertson et al., 2022), which suggests that the location of businesses in Albany is more economically proactive and strategic. These preferences illustrate an upwardly mobile, spatially selective migrant class whose business decisions are informed by family strategy and lifestyle goals.

Additionally, this study highlights active place-making and symbolic branding practices among migrant entrepreneurs, particularly the naming of the Corinthian Drive commercial area as ‘唐人汇’ (*Tangrenhui*). This demonstrates that Chinese entrepreneurs are not only spatial actors responding to existing ethnic infrastructure but also cultural producers who reshape suburban landscapes through symbolic and economic intervention. This resonates with Collins et al.’s (2020) findings in Australia, which show that migrant entrepreneurs participate in the symbolic transformation of space by embedding cultural markers and business identities into the suburban landscape. The naming of ‘唐人汇’ reflects a similar logic of ethnic branding and identity projection. Furthermore, it represents an intentional effort to embed cultural meaning into suburban space, transforming it into an identifiable ethnic business centre. Such proactive naming practices are rarely addressed in previous studies and constitute a significant extension to the ethnoburb framework.

This study highlights the active symbolic placemaking practices of Chinese entrepreneurs that have not been fully explored in existing ethnoburb literature. Unlike other ethnic business clusters in Auckland (Xue et al., 2012), Albany reflects intentional spatial branding that reinforces ethnic identity and business visibility. These actions suggest that immigrant entrepreneurs are adapting to existing environments while also actively participating in shaping suburban landscapes, thereby extending the scope of ethnoburb theory to include cultural production as a central process.

Theoretical contributions

First, this study deepens the mixed embeddedness theory by showing that migrant entrepreneurs actively shape the spatial and cultural dynamics of their business environments. Chinese entrepreneurs in Albany were not only constrained by institutional and market structures; they strategically responded to and changed these conditions. Through location choices, engagement with the planning system, and the integration of cultural symbols into business spaces, they have navigated and reconstructed the suburban landscape. This goes beyond a model of passive adaptation and demonstrates how embeddedness can be both responsive and productive in generating new social space. This reinforces that migrant entrepreneurs possess spatial agency, as conceptualised in our adaptation of the mixed embeddedness framework.

Second, the findings enrich ethnoburb theory by emphasising micro-level business institutions. While most previous studies have viewed ethnoburbs as a spatial form produced by population concentration, this study suggests that businesses intentionally shape spatial formation, cultural reproduction, and urban consolidation. That is, ethnoburbs are produced by the combination of demographics, business decisions, and cultural practices.

Third, the findings connect transnational migration and business studies by emphasising the co-composition of space and business. Instead of viewing business as a passive response to established settlements, this study shows a mutually beneficial dynamic in which business clusters help to shape suburban identities, strengthen ethnic cohesion, and attract further settlement. This reciprocal dynamic between migrant entrepreneurship and suburban transformation offers a new analytical lens, advancing the theorisation of ethnoburbs as co-produced spaces rather than static demographic outcomes. It reframes Chinese migrant businesses as spatial agents whose actions are both embedded and transformative.

Summary of contributions

This study makes three distinct contributions to the literature on migrant entrepreneurship and suburban ethnic geographies:

First, the article advances the mixed embeddedness framework (Kloosterman, 2010) by integrating the concepts of spatial agency and symbolic place-making. It goes beyond structural constraints to show how migrant entrepreneurs actively shape suburban environments, through locational decisions, cultural aesthetics, and strategic branding. The case of naming ‘唐人汇’ illustrates how cultural identity becomes embedded in spatial form, extending existing theorisation of ethnoburbs from demographic outcomes to culturally produced spaces.

Second, the study offers original qualitative evidence from New Zealand, an under-explored site in ethnoburb literature, which has traditionally focused on North America and Australia. By highlighting the lived experiences and locational strategies of 16 Chinese migrant entrepreneurs in Albany, it provides micro-level insights into how everyday spatial decisions contribute to suburban ethnic transformation, economic clustering, and cultural expression.

Third, the findings reveal that migrant businesses challenge conventional zoning assumptions by producing vibrant mixed-use nodes within suburban areas. This suggests a need for more inclusive urban planning that accommodates migrant economic activity and ethnic place-making. In contexts such as New Zealand, where suburban planning is often residentially biased, recognising the transformative agency of migrant entrepreneurs can support more culturally responsive and socially integrated urban futures.

From a practical perspective, this study provides important policy and urban planning insights. Urban planning departments and policymakers should pay attention to the proactive spatial reconstruction behaviours of migrant businesses and support migrant economic and community development through more flexible land planning policies, mixed-use development patterns, and culturally sensitive designs to enhance the economic vitality and multicultural integration of cities. Businesses in Albany have strengthened their ethnic identity, but this may be accompanied by a certain risk of community

isolation. Therefore, the city should encourage interactions and communication activities between different ethnic groups to reduce the risk of social isolation and promote broader community integration.

Limitations and future research directions

This study also has some limitations, such as a relatively limited number of participants and a concentration on the Albany area. Therefore, future studies might expand the sample size and conduct comparative studies across regions or cities. In addition, they could focus on how factors such as digital platforms and social-media marketing influence the distribution of migrant businesses.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how new Chinese migrant businesses in Albany strategically engage the spatial, cultural, and institutional environments to create a distinctive ethno-burb. In addition to confirming existing theories, the findings revealed a transformation towards aspirational, lifestyle-driven entrepreneurship and symbolic placemaking. By extending the mixed embeddedness and ethnoburb literatures, the study demonstrates that migrant businesses both adapt to and transform suburban landscapes. These insights suggest that planning policy should recognise the creativity of migrant businesses and support culturally embedded economic development. Future research should explore comparative cases and digital dimensions to enrich the understanding of contemporary migrant urbanisation.

Notes

1. 'New Chinese migrants' in the New Zealand context is a term that usually refers to Chinese who migrated to New Zealand after the introduction of the Immigration Policy Review in 1986, which abolished the traditional origin preference for British migrants. Among the new Chinese migrants, the three major sources are immigrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the PRC. These three groups plus Chinese from other countries (e.g., Malaysia and Indonesia) are all categorised as new Chinese migrants in New Zealand. New Chinese migrants are distinct from the early Chinese migrants in New Zealand. The early Chinese migrants were mostly uneducated male peasants from rural Southern China, and they migrated primarily because of the economic opportunities found in the gold mines in the Western world and the tin mines and plantations in Central America. However, most contemporary Chinese migrants are highly educated and possess specialised skills or financial capital, which lets them qualify and meet the entry criteria of New Zealand.
2. In this study, the 'China-rising generation' refers to migrants who arrived in New Zealand after the turn of the millennium and benefitted from China's rapid economic development, which increased their capacity to mobilise capital for international migration (Liu et al., 2022).
3. '唐人汇' (*Tangrenhui*) is the Chinese name informally adopted by local entrepreneurs for the business cluster on Corinthian Drive in Albany. The precinct functions as a vibrant hub for Chinese dining and commerce, reflecting broader demographic and cultural changes in Albany.

Acknowledgements

The first author wishes to express sincere gratitude to Associate Professor Mingsheng Li and Associate Professor Geoff Watson for their valuable guidance throughout the development of this article. Special thanks are also extended to all the interview participants whose insights and generous sharing of experiences made this research possible.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research received no external funding.

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Ethical Approval Statement

The research was approved by Massey University's Human Ethics Committees and judged to be low risk (Ethics Notification Number 4000026983).

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